DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 588 CS 215 597

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TITLE Illiterate Sorrows: Misrepresenting Literacy and Intelligence.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; Differences; *Educational History; *Illiteracy; *Literacy; Popular Culture; *Regional Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachia (South); Discourse Communities; *New Jersey (Pine Barrens Area)

ABSTRACT

Representations of illiteracy in bureaucratic, journalistic, and literary treatments of southern Appalachia reveal a substantial practice by metropolitans of blaming illiteracy in the region for its supposed failure to integrate materially and culturally into a national economy. Yet patterns of illiteracy in southern Appalachia resemble patterns elsewhere in the United States. Around the turn of the century, however, the difference between southern Appalachia and the rest of the nation was emphatically marked by recurring narratives about the region's extraordinary rate of illiteracy. The massive anti-illiteracy campaigns that states like Kentucky staged created an opportunity for underpaid and disrespected schoolteachers to demonstrate professional expertise far beyond what they could exhibit in the privacy of their classrooms. An examination of professional discourses on illiteracy in the southern New Jersey "Pine Barrens" evolved into something different from that of Appalachia. In 1826 a missionary report refers to men and women unable to read and therefore unable to attain Christian salvation through studying holy scripture. By 1844, however, widespread family illiteracy is reported--there is "very little if any taste for reading" among inhabitants. New Jersey natives from John McPhee to Edmund Wilson have assayed the Pines and not missed the opportunity to echo the discourse of illiteracy in their constructions of that place as a world apart. Is it possible that professional educators remain dependent on illiteracy--or rather localized figures of illiteracy--to create the very places and spaces where their work can be advanced? (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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1996 CCCC Convention
Session M.20: Literacy and Exclusion (Roundtable)
Saturday, March 30, 9:30–10:45 a.m.

ED 402 588

Illiterate Sorrows: Misrepresenting Literacy and Intelligence

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For my contribution to this morning's roundtable, I'd like to look briefly at how popular and professional representations of illiteracy can influence the narrative formation of geographic regions that come to be identified as alien, as uncultured, as beyond the pale. I'll try to cast my remarks in a way that opens out into our common concern here about literacy and exclusion.

In the United States, territories that remain unassimilated into the cultural and political mainstream have always been rich fields for professional endeavor of one sort or another. Let me illustrate. I have for some time now been studying representations of illiteracy in bureaucratic, journalistic, and literary treatments of southern Appalachia. This inquiry has turned up a substantial practice by metropolitans of blaming illiteracy in southern Appalachia for the region's supposed failure to integrate materially and culturally into a national economy. But it has ever been the case that patterns of illiteracy in southern Appalachia resemble such patterns elsewhere in the United States. Yet during the period that most interests me—around the turn of the twentieth century—the difference between southern Appalachia and the rest of the nation was emphatically marked by recurring narratives about the region's extraordinary rate of illiteracy. While such narratives undoubtedly served many purposes, surely one was to warrant the massive anti-illiteracy campaigns that states like Kentucky staged in the early part of the century. Not incidentally, these campaigns created an opportunity for underpaid

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and disrespected schoolteachers to demonstrate professional expertise far beyond what they could exhibit in the relative privacy of their own classrooms. While some illiterate adults did in fact learn to read and write during the Kentucky campaigns—and the importance of this should not be diminished—the most widespread and enduring benefits of the effort accrued in enhance public appreciation of the teaching profession. (Similar arguments can be made about efforts to eradicate illiteracy elsewhere in the south and southwest at roughly the same time; see Mortensen for details on Kentucky's anti-illiteracy campaigns.)

Of course, to really test this notion that discourses on illiteracy and regional alienation can be linked to professional motives, I've had to look beyond textual inventions of southern Appalachia. Thus, I've recently begun studying the so-called Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, in large part because there is extensive documentary evidence of life in the Pines, evidence that dates back to the area's colonial settlement. What I'd like to examine for the next few minutes, then, are some excerpts from published and unpublished sources that suggest how professional discourses on illiteracy in the New Jersey Pines evolved into something quite apart from such discourses on southern Appalachia.

Some of the earliest reports from the Pines that make explicit mention of illiteracy can be found in the correspondence of students at Princeton Theological Seminary, students who made independent forays into the area to preach the Gospel, Presbyterian style. One such report from 1826, filed by a William S. Potts, makes repeated reference to men and women who appear (to him) unable to read—and who therefore are unable to attain Christian salvation through the study of holy scripture (see

Smoot). As you can see in the handout, Potts figures illiteracy as a spiritual stumbling block: if people could just read the Bible, then he could be about the good work saving souls. While Potts makes an implicit connection between illiteracy and probable damnation, he is careful not to forge a link between illiteracy and intelligence. Indeed, he writes specifically of "a lad of uncommon smartness, though unable to read." Illiteracy is instead rendered as a failure of moral—not intellectual—dimensions, a failure with greater implications for the day of reckoning than for daily life in the Pines.

But as missionary work in the Pines became more professional under the aegis of the American Tract Society, the discourse on illiteracy began to change (see Nord). Mission reports from 1843 and 1844 register a perspective on the relationship between literacy and intelligence quite unlike Potts's. Consider, for example, reports filed by two young men in the summer of 1844. David William Eakins remarks on widespread family illiteracy, and notes further that in at least one settlement he found "very little if any taste for reading" among the inhabitants. Samuel McCulloh goes a step beyond Eakins in his charge that illiteracy has become an intergenerational affliction. What has happened by 1844 is that literacy is no longer imagined to be merely absent from the Pines; there is a sense that the people of the Pines have developed an unnatural aversion to reading and writing, and that over successive generations this aversion has intensified the depravity in which the irreligious inevitably dwell (see New Jersey Historical Records).

An 1859 essay in Atlantic Monthly puts this notion of intergenerational illiteracy before a public audience and sharpens the argument linking illiteracy not just to moral failure, but to a more general failure of a local culture to thrive. So grave is this failure

that the author concludes that the Pine "Rat must follow the Indian,—must fade like breath from a windowpane in winter!" (Mayer 568).

Now, as the influence of a professional clergy waned in the nineteenth century, and as new generations of secular professionals gained authority, the established problem of how to talk about illiteracy and region persisted. Consider, for example, how sociologist Elizabeth S. Kite accounts for the illiteracy and ignorance she claims, in 1913, is rife in the Pines. She notes that

> until recently it has been confidently hoped that through education and the opening of the Pines, he [Kite's "Piney"] would eventually become a normal citizen. (7)

But she concludes that

> the Piney and all the rest of his type have become barnacles upon our civilization, all the higher functions of whose manhood have been atrophied through disuse. (10)

Presumably some normative capacity for acquisition of literacy is one of the "higher functions" no longer possessed by men and women living in the Pines. For Kite, the failure to read and write, the failure to thrive morally and physically, has led over time to the same degenerate brutishness that the Atlantic Monthly author observed over a half-century earlier.

But Kite does not conclude that her "Pineys" will follow some Darwinian path to self-destruction. And because extinction is not a possibility, it is Kite's position that professional intervention must be undertaken to curb what she labels rampant "feeble-mindedness" in the Pines. Chief among strategies employed by Kite and her senior

colleagues was the imposition of institutional care aimed at eliminating reproductive freedom, aimed at safeguarding the genetic integrity of nearby "normal" populations—especially those in metropolitan Philadelphia and New York. In subsequent research, Kite and her colleagues returned again and again to adult illiteracy as a primary symptom of feeble-mindedness and idiocy, both heritable mental conditions of central concern to American eugenicist in the teens, twenties, and thirties.

(We know now, by the way, that rates of rudimentary literacy in the Pines—like southern Appalachia—did not differ appreciably from rates in surrounding areas at the turn of the century [see Sinton qtd. in Cohen 46]. But the stigma of illiteracy in the Pines persists, if in slightly evolved form. New Jersey natives from Edmund Wilson to John McPhee have assayed the Pines, and have not missed the opportunity to echo the discourse of illiteracy in their constructions of that place as a world apart.)

In a 1940 interview, Elizabeth Kite expressed regret that her published writing on feeble-mindedness in the New Jersey Pine Barrens had humiliated the region's inhabitants. In a statement which I choose to read ironically in closing, Kite says, "I have no language in which I can express my admiration for the pines and the people who live there" (Halpert 11-12). Do we in this profession, I wonder, share Kite's inability to speak when confronted with the unintended consequences of our contemporary discourses on illiteracy? Do we tolerate (or even nurture) this impediment because, known to us or not, we remain dependent on illiteracy—or rather localized figures of illiteracy—to create the very places and spaces where we can advance our professional work, our professional worth?

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Commentaries on Literacy and Illiteracy in the New Jersey Pine Barrens

1826 "At the place called *The Half Way*, **we found a family able to read a little**, in the same careless way with those we had left, and a visitor, who denied the Scriptures, refused to have anything to do with our tracts, and whose words were charged with the most bitter enmity to God and all his followers. . . . We called on Mr. Webb's family, and then were piloted about a mile through the devious pine paths until we again arrived at a plain road, by **a lad of uncommon smartness, though unable to read**. . . . They are almost all drunkards, and so far as I could learn, are all profane men. **I found but three men who were able to read**. One woman told me she had received a *desperate nice* Bible from one of our young men, (Mr. Brearly) and **as she could not read**, I inquired how often she had had it read to her, during the year it had been in her possession, she answered not once, but seemed to think there was a saving efficacy in having it in her house. . . . I asked the blacksmith, whether he thought it was better to break the laws of God than of man—He said . . . **he was 'not larned, & could not tell anything about laws.'** I then sharply reproved his conduct. . . . On the way to Wrightstown I visited a small house occupied by a black family; the man said he belonged to the sect called *Universalists*, and that he did not believe the New Testament;—that **it was a book put out by these *high learned people*, who wanted to make poor people believe any thing and every thing. . . . Neither the man nor his wife were able to read**." William S. Potts, student at Princeton Theological Seminary, after a summer mission in the Pines.

1844 "In our visits among the families, contained in the portions of Monmouth & Burlington Counties to which we were confined, **it was no unusual thing to meet with whole families, not a single member of which could read**. . . . Connected with the rolling-mill (Mr. Cooper's) they have a library for the use of the men employed in that establishment, but **there appeared to be very little if any taste for reading**." David William Eakins, student at Princeton Theological Seminary, in colporteur report to the American Tract Society.

1844 "It is for the condition of such as these ignorant & depraved as they mostly are, that the Christian heart should deeply feel, & indeed yearn over them. **Without schools within their reach, or the disposition to profit by them if they had them, they had grown up generation after generation, three fourths of them unable to read a sentence**." Samuel McCulloh, student at Princeton Theological Seminary, in colporteur report to the American Tract Society.

1859 "**Completely besotted and brutish in their ignorance**, they are incapable of obtaining an honest living, and have supported themselves, from a time which may be called immemorial, by practising petty larceny on an organized plan. The Pine Rat steals wood, steals anything, in fact, that his hand can be laid upon; and woe to the property of the man who dares attempt restrain him! . . . . There is no room for a gypsy in all our wide America! The Rat must follow the Indian,—must fade like breath from a windowpane in winter!" W. F. Mayer, *Atlantic Monthly*.

1913 "The general opinion current regarding the Piney and his class, has been that he is what he is from environment, and that surrounded with other conditions and 'given a chance' he would come out 'all right.' That he is a 'problem,' that his presence tends to lower standards of living among the normal people who come in contact with him, is a universally recognized fact, but **until recently it has been confidently hoped that through education and the opening of the Pines, he would eventually become a normal citizen**. . . . But the real Piney has no inclination to labor, submitting to every privation in order to avoid it. Lazy, lustful and cunning, he is a degenerate creature who has learned to provide for himself the bare necessities of life without entering into life's stimulating struggle. Like the degenerate relative of the crab that ages ago gave up a free roving life and, gluing its head to a rock, built a wall of defence around itself, spending the rest of its life kicking food into its mouth and enjoying the functionings of reproduction, **the Piney and all the rest of his type have become barnacles upon our civilization, all the higher functions of whose manhood have been atrophied through disuse**." Elizabeth S. Kite, staff researcher at the Training School at Vineland, New Jersey.

1922 "Another element of New Jersey society which exists independently of the cities is the settlement of poor white trash or 'pine rats' which infests the southern pines. . . . [S]cattered about the edges of this desert are found **rudimentary communities of men who manage to live in a perpetual state of indolence and destitution**. Without lawyer, doctor, or clergy, in the crudest of timber shacks, devoured daily by fleas, mosquitoes, sand-ticks, and gigantic flies, **they ask nothing of the world but to be allowed to deteriorate in peace**. They have practically nothing except gin that civilization can supply. They are interrupted only by sociologists who find them a useful laboratory of degeneracy. . . ." Edmund Wilson, Jr., *The Nation*.

1940 "I have no language in which I can express my admiration for the pines and the people who live there." Elizabeth S. Kite, interviewed by folklorist Herbert Halpert.

1967 "While isolation in the woods was bringing out self-reliance, it was also contributing to other developments that eventually attracted more attention. After the pine towns lost touch, to a large extent, with the outside world, **some of the people slid into illiteracy, and a number slid further than that**. Marriages were pretty casual in the pines late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth. . . . A surprising number of people in New Jersey today seem to think that the Pine Barrens are **dark backlands inhabited by hostile and semi-literate people** who would as soon shoot an outsider as look at him." John McPhee, a Princeton native, in *The Pine Barrens*, first published in the *New Yorker*.